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SUBJECT: ENGAGE BURMA: EUROPEAN VIEWS

REF: A. RANGOON 1199

[1](#)B. RANGOON 1198 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)C. RANGOON 1059

Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Recent meetings with all European diplomatic missions represented in Rangoon (plus two accredited missions resident in Bangkok) revealed waning support for advancing democracy and human rights in Burma, and growing interest in expanding humanitarian assistance. The British join us as the staunchest supporters of the democratic opposition and the use of pressure as a means to seek change from the current regime, though they differ somewhat on tactics. Ennui best describes the attitude of the other Europeans present in Rangoon. End Summary.

UNITED KINGDOM: SEARCHING FOR NEW WAYS TO PROMOTE CHANGE

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Charge made her first courtesy call in Rangoon (September 1) on British Ambassador Vicky Bowman. The UK joins us as the staunchest supporters of the democratic opposition, democracy, and human rights in Burma and our encounters with our British colleagues are frequent. For example, our respective policy teams met for a working lunch on October 11 to discuss a range of political and economic issues as well as public diplomacy efforts.

[1](#)3. (C) The British not only share overall U.S. objectives in Burma, they are easily the most visible and active supporters of the democratic opposition among European missions (four EU member states are resident in Rangoon and over a half dozen missions, including the EC delegation, are accredited but resident in Bangkok). In particular, British diplomats regularly visit National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters and they often join us as the only diplomatic missions in attendance at NLD party functions. The British also have a robust public diplomacy program; their British Council activities parallel many of those at our American Center, including civics and democracy-building instruction to members of the political opposition and to former political prisoners.

[1](#)4. (C) The British, particularly during Amb. Bowman's tenure, have advocated more humanitarian assistance for Burma. Although we share objectives, our tactics sometimes diverge. Bowman, for example, believes the GOB should be a full partner on most assistance projects. She recently secured the assignment to Rangoon of a representative of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to coordinate growing British assistance activities.

[1](#)5. (C) Bowman, on her second tour in Rangoon and a fluent Burmese speaker, has become quite passionate about Burma. She has sharply criticized the decision by the Global Fund to withdraw from Burma. She freely expresses displeasure with Burmese exiles and their supporters who lobby overseas to oppose any collaboration with the GOB and its entities. She organized a closed meeting at Wilton Park, in September, to discuss new approaches to humanitarian assistance. (Note: The UK tasked Michael Ryder to prepare a report on this meeting, and follow-up discussions, for submission to the FCO at the end of October. End Note.) As Chair of the UN Expanded Theme Group on HIV/AIDS, Bowman has marshaled support for the Fund for HIV/AIDS in Myanmar (FAHM), which partners with the GOB's Ministry of Health. The UK is the largest donor to the FAHM and contributed over \$17 million last year; Sweden and Norway are the other main donors.

FRANCE: "SANCTIONS FEEL GOOD, BUT DON'T DO GOOD"

[1](#)6. (C) On September 19, the Charge called on French Ambassador Jean-Michel Lacombe, who has been in Burma for two years. Lacombe said that sanctions "feel good, but don't do good," and are only effective if most neighboring countries participate. He acknowledged that the only sanction that really hurts is the visa sanction, referring to the EU decision to deny the GOB Minister for Economic Development a visa to attend an ASEM meeting. The visa sanction, he said, highlights the regime's lack of legitimacy. Lacombe viewed Secretary Rice's comments on Burma at the September ASEAN

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foreign ministers meeting in New York as helpful, but added

that sanctions give more influence to China, which is "colonizing Burma," He said in Burma, the West is "not fighting the junta, but fighting Chinese diplomacy." The Charge observed that China wants stability in Burma, but also must confront a flow of cross-border drugs and disease.

17. (C) Amb. Lacombe described the Global Fund's withdrawal from Burma as a "U.S. Congressional decision" and said the action will hurt the ability of NGOs to work in country. The international community should let in humanitarian aid, urged Lacombe, because the situation is no worse in Burma than it is in Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam. Lacombe, who has also served in Georgia and Bangladesh, added that donors give aid to some other countries knowing up that up to 70 percent goes into government coffers. The Charge countered that donors should not provide any assistance in Burma without capable people to deliver the aid. She also observed that if the international community remains divided on this issue, it only serves to bolster the GOB's interests.

18. (C) Lacombe said that the regime has no real interest in democracy and described the National Convention as a sham exercise. He opined that former Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt had attempted, but failed, to address the concerns of the international community, so the only remaining hope for political change in Burma today is the new generation of military officers. However, Lacombe added, the SPDC makes a valid point in emphasizing its important security role because ethnic divisions do threaten national unity. Alluding to cease-fire arrangements over the past 17 years, Lacombe said that the regime is slowly extending central authority to the country's borders.

#### GERMANY: OSTPOLITIK REDUX

19. (C) On September 26, the Charge called on German Ambassador Dietrich Andreas, a new arrival in Burma, who transferred here directly from Dhaka in July. Andreas complained that Burmese exile groups have an "opinion monopoly" controlling Western policy. He observed that Western nations have "isolated" themselves from contact with the GOB, while the regime benefits from supportive contact with countries with which it enjoys closer relations.

10. (C) In response, the Charge noted that the GOB is extremely inwardly focused and that even those countries that maintain close contact do not seem to have much influence. The Charge noted that other autocratic ASEAN countries have recognized that standards of living could improve with more open policies. This did not seem to be the case in Burma. She suggested that the international community, which concurs on most long-term objectives, should not waste time arguing over short-term tactics, since it allows the GOB to divert the argument from its own failures to international differences on Burma.

11. (C) Discussion shifted to the next generation of military leaders and whether they shared the same inward focus of the current generals. The second tier officers seemed to all be "yes-men," according to the Charge, who are part of the same system and want to share its spoils. Perhaps younger officers recognize how far Burma has fallen behind. Andreas said that the Germans have had some contact with third tier officers, but their views remain cryptic. He added that the decline in education standards in Burma severely limited the potential of successor generations. The Charge agreed, noting that the regime leaders sent their own children and grandchildren abroad, while driving the Burmese educational system backwards.

12. (C) The German Ambassador asserted that sanctions had not won any more freedom for Aung San Suu Kyi. He asked what would result in any change in U.S. sanctions policy, and whether there are any differences among the legislative and executive branches in the United States and the U.K. on this issue. The Charge described the overwhelming bipartisan agreement on Burma policy in the U.S. She reiterated that forward leaning engagement had shown no results either, adding that U.S. and EU policies also had the important result of denying the SPDC the legitimacy it craves. Andreas observed that the opposition remains weak and passive. The Charge replied that it is hard to be active when many of its members are in jail.

13. (C) Based on his involvement in the reunification of Germany in 1990, Andreas stressed the importance of talking to all parties, in order to move quickly when the right time comes. The Charge said that the U.S. placed a high priority on promoting a dialogue inclusive of all Burmese to produce genuine national reconciliation. She pointed out that the U.S. reaches out to a wide range of Burmese citizens today through our American Center programs. However, she noted, it is not the West, but rather the Burmese Government that bans exiles and most legislators from visiting and engaging in public dialogue here. More sharing of information would benefit all.

ITALY: ISOLATION IS WHAT THE REGIME WANTS

14. (C) Italian Ambassador Raffaele Miniero, during the Charge's courtesy call on September 29, said that after three years in Rangoon he believes the SPDC regime is now "in a perfect situation, right where they want to be." He said the regime generals are isolated by the international community, "free from outside pressure, so they are capable of doing whatever they want to do." He observed that the practical outcome of Burma's membership in ASEAN was that the "Burmese generals exert influence on ASEAN, rather than the other way around, as was anticipated."

15. (C) Miniero advocated engagement with the regime, but acknowledged that he had given up on his own efforts at dialogue, with either GOB officials or with opposition figures. "It's completely useless to try and talk with these guys," he said. Miniero criticized the Global Fund for terminating its Burma programs, assessing that even if some funds went to the regime, "at least some of the assistance benefited the Burmese people."

16. (C) Miniero also criticized the EU decision to deny a visa to the Burmese Minister for Economic Development to attend the September ASEM Economic Ministerial. "This great mistake," he said, "creates solidarity among the ASEAN countries on Burma and reduces communication with the regime." (Note: Miniero has told others that the Dutch visa decision was unilateral, rather than in accordance with the EU's Common Position on Burma. End Note.) The Charge cited the utility of reminding the senior generals that they are not legitimate leaders and pointed out that Miniero had already commented that there was no point in even talking to the Ministers.

17. (C) Ambassador Miniero agreed that political change must come from inside Burma, but added that "this won't happen; there's no movement among students or within the military." He criticized the Burmese people for being passive, "unlike the Latin Americans, who can fight." He observed that there will be no political change as long as China and India maintain a policy of engagement and assistance. "As a matter of survival," Miniero added, "the generals will continue to rely on these two neighbors."

18. (C) The Charge disagreed with the Italian Ambassador's assessment on the future of Burma, noting that many observers had also been skeptical that militaries would give way in Indonesia and Thailand. They changed. Even in Burma, she said, large numbers of people grew so frustrated in 1988 that they took to the streets, where they risked machine gun fire to express a desire for democratic government. "The military acts in its own interests," she added, "and if the winds change, there could be officers and soldiers who change also."

SWEDEN: WE ONLY WANT TO HELP BURMA

19. (C) On September 28, the Charge received Swedish Ambassador Jonas Hafstrom, who resides in Bangkok and has been accredited to Burma since June. Hafstrom questioned the Dutch/EU decision to deny visas to senior regime officials, adding that many in the EU thought it was time to review the policy. "We can have a tough policy," he said, "but we don't want to look foolish (by denying visas, but agreeing to meet the Burmese elsewhere)." He regretted the Global Fund withdrawal from Burma, saying that the international community needed to provide help, especially in the education and health sectors. In this regard, he added, the European Commission would soon post an aid officer (ECHO) to Rangoon to facilitate assistance programs.

20. (C) The Charge acknowledged that dialogue is important, but countered that a genuine dialogue requires that the GOB produce interlocutors who are willing and capable of exchanging serious views. "The problem," she said, "is that the regime refuses to discuss anything that makes it uncomfortable." She noted that ASEAN members preach engagement with the regime, but "even they don't get access to top leaders." The Charge added that sanctions denied the regime generals the legitimacy that they craved. She encouraged the EU to maintain a visa ban when reviewing its Common Position on Burma.

21. (C) Responding to the Swedish Ambassador's plea for assistance in Burma, the Charge acknowledged the country's humanitarian needs, but cautioned that donors must avoid benefiting the regime. As an example of the need for vigilance, she cited a World Food Programme (WFP) report earlier this year that revealed the GOB had diverted millions of dollars in aid by surreptitiously taxing WFP's local procurement of food. Ambassador Hafstrom described Sweden as the largest donor on the Thai-Burma border and added that the EU was considering a new plan that could involve up to 20 million euros in assistance annually. He acknowledged that Burma would continue to have a serious problem absorbing

humanitarian assistance, but was encouraged by the Charge's assessment that there are ways to make a difference in the country without strengthening the regime, primarily by working through responsible NGOs.

#### CZECH REPUBLIC: STILL BELIEVES

122. (C) Czech Ambassador Jiri Sitler injected a refreshing, positive note when he met with the Charge on October 14. Also resident in Bangkok, he expressed regret that he had not had many opportunities to visit Burma. He requested suggestions on how the Czechs could effectively provide assistance. He mentioned that visits to the Burmese exile community in Thailand revealed many differences among those advocating democracy in Burma.

123. (C) The Charge mentioned that the Havel-Tutu report had touched a nerve with the regime, which indicated that the military was more sensitive to outside criticism than it liked to admit. Sitler replied that former President Havel was amused by the bad poetry the military had published in the New Light of Myanmar (official regime newspaper) criticizing the report. He added that Havel was very sincere in his desire to promote democracy in Burma. Sitler provided us with a copy of Havel's booklet, entitled "Power of the Powerless," which had been translated into Burmese. The Charge suggested that a Burmese translation of at least the executive summary of the Havel-Tutu report would be eagerly devoured.

124. (C) After describing our American Center programs, the Charge suggested that we might be able to work together to arrange programs for Czech speakers. Sitler seemed very interested, assuming the speakers would get visas. He knew of speakers, familiar with the Czech Republic's transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, who could discuss how journalists handled censorship or how to build coalitions and the art of compromise. He also offered to provide English translations of books like "The Good Soldier Schweik" that lampooned autocratic regimes and videos of comedians satirizing government.

#### SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO: WHY IS HE HERE?

125. (C) The Charge made a brief courtesy call in late September on Dragan Janekovic, Charge d'Affaires for Serbia and Montenegro. Janekovic, considered a cartoonish lightweight among the local diplomatic corps, especially by other European representatives, offered no real observations on Burma's domestic political or economic situation. He claimed that Serbia had a strong interest in Southeast Asia, but revealed no details, other than to say that Serbia and Montenegro wanted to export agricultural machinery and electronics. (Note: Although they have had a presence in Rangoon since the 1950s, Serbia's small diplomatic presence in Rangoon is widely considered to be aimed at supporting Serbian commercial arms sales to the Burmese military. Janekovic did not address this topic. End Note.)

#### COMMENT: OUT OF SYNCH WITH THEIR OWN PEOPLE?

126. (C) Close coordination with the EU member states is essential for advancing Burma policy. Their support for democracy and human rights provides a crucial multilateral context to our own policy efforts. Their local advocacy of engagement with the regime, however, strikes us as being out of synch with their own public (which several of the Ambassadors acknowledged and summarily dismissed). The private grumbling and pointed criticism we've heard over the EU visa decision and the Global Fund's withdrawal from Burma, for example, do not correspond with the EU Common Position on sanctions nor with the EU's well-prepared annual draft of the UNGA resolution. Perhaps it requires Europeans, like the Czechs, still reveling in democracy. Fortunately, our European friends who have enjoyed democracy for much longer do appreciate the power of the people, even if their diplomats do not. We should ensure that our public diplomacy programs in these EU countries emphasize shared interest in promoting democracy and human rights in places like Burma, and make sure that Burma remains sufficiently high-profile in order to avoid getting sidelined by bored diplomats. End Comment.

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